

# The Christian

# News-Letter

Edited by  
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THE QUESTION OF THE REUNION of the Church is generally considered to be the special preserve of the parson and the professional theologian. Reunion is discussed chiefly at esoteric conferences of eminent ecclesiastics, which produce reports as forbidding as they are unintelligible to the layman. Even when they are convinced that reunion is important, most Christians who are not primarily theologians would have to confess that they find it extremely difficult to take an intelligent and informed interest in the subject. Yet, although theological discussion is essential, the Churches cannot be looked upon simply as the complete embodiment of the theological ideas they profess. They are imperfect human societies, conditioned more than they frequently realize by the world around them. Because of this, the Christian whose daily preoccupation is with secular society has a distinctive contribution to make to the discussion of reunion that is essential to a satisfactory solution.

## NEWS-LETTER

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OF OSLO  
BY  
M. M. THOMAS

## THE NEWS-LETTER AND REUNION

It is this which makes it appropriate to raise the question of reunion in the News-Letter, the primary purpose of which is to discover our Christian duty in secular society. While it is often convenient to distinguish the two spheres, it is against the background of secular society and in constant

relation with it that the common life of the Church itself is lived. To discuss reunion only in terms of the relation of self-enclosed ecclesiastical bodies to one another, without reference to the society in which together they have to serve God, is surely the most unreal of proceedings. On the other hand, an increasing sense among laymen of Christian vocation in and responsibility towards society may help the discussion of reunion to move on to a more concrete plane. In our short experience of work in the Christian Frontier, we discover that when people begin to take seriously their vocations as Christians in society, it is not long before they begin to look inwards at the Church with fresh insight and enquiry. The fact that Christian work in secular society has to be in the main inter-denominational in character makes the question of reunion a particularly acute one.

#### THE WAY TO INTEREST LAYMEN IN REUNION

Three reasons may be suggested why reunion should be actively discussed in the context of the Church's relation to secular society. The first is that unless the most active and responsible lay members of the Church participate in the movement to recover its unity, agreements reached by the theologians are not likely to be effectively implemented in the life of the Church. All who work in the ecumenical movement know that one of the chief difficulties in the way of drawing the Churches closer together is the deep-rooted indifference of the majority of church members to the subject. Many people believe vaguely that reunion would be a very good thing, but that belief is not strong enough to lead them to make the readjustment of outlook and behaviour which any serious move in that direction would involve. The primary way to stir them out of this inertia is not to try to interest them in the reports of ecclesiastical conferences about reunion, as these reports, unless they are quite improperly glamorized, must always seem mysterious and boring to those who are not actively associated with the conferences themselves. It is by bringing them together, out of their differing theological and ecclesiastical contexts, to engage in constructive Christian thought and action in secular society. It is because the laity have been made to

see their Christian vocation too much in terms of fulfilling external religious observances that they attach such disproportionate importance to the external differences between Churches and so steadfastly resist any attempt at change which drawing closer to another church tradition might involve. It is when they ask themselves what being a Christian means in terms of their jobs or their political duty and try to live it out, that their unity with and their differences from Christians of other traditions come alive.

### CHURCH ORDER AND THE SECULAR

The second reason is closely linked with this. The non-Roman Churches in this country have drawn much closer together in recent years in theological matters but there are still some issues about which great difficulties remain. Perhaps the chief of these is the doctrine of the ministry. A great deal of useful theological work still needs to be done on this matter but, whatever the results of that work, one fact is already sufficiently clear. No lasting agreement between the divided Churches will take place as long as it is discussed solely on the theological level. The discussion needs a new setting before agreement can be reached.

The greatest single factor in creating such a new setting would be the appearance in all the Churches in Britain of a much stronger and more alert and critically-minded laity, who try to discharge to the full both their ecclesiastical and secular responsibilities. Even in the Churches in which the laity play a larger part than in some others, they do not always bring insights derived from Christian experience in secular society to bear upon their church life. The emergence of such a laity would be a fact which all theologians would have to take account of and it would compel them to look at their positions in a fresh light. For example, when the Protestant Churches are compelled to face a Catholicism which possesses a revived laity, reintegrated into its church order, they will be constrained to listen in a quite new way to the Catholic claims for the episcopal ministry, which at present make no impression on them.

What is suggested here is not less theology and more practical action. Such a distinction is over-simple and



nearly always serves only to mislead. We need more theological discussion of reunion, not less, but a discussion carried on with a clear reference to the total human situation in which the Churches have to carry on their work to-day. Even important theological disagreements appear in a different light when we contemplate the task of the laity of a weak and divided Church in the midst of a confused and indifferent society from that in which they present themselves when theologians are pursuing the argument relentlessly in their studies or when ecclesiastical partisans are stirring up their faithful followers. Regard for the exigencies of the Churches' social witness may not necessarily lead the theologians to agree. In some instances, it may serve only to underline the importance of theological disagreements. But, at least, to bear them in mind will help the theologian do his job properly.

#### DIVIDED CHURCHES AND THE STATE

The third reason is that the division of the Church constitutes a social problem. The Churches of our land are in the habit of offering themselves to-day as the means of integration of a society which is alleged to be disintegrating all around them. The truth, however, is very different. Despite determined efforts to pull them together, the Churches remain obstinately disintegrated, while the State is increasingly creating the framework of a new, very closely integrated society before our eyes. It is true that it is an integration on a very superficial level, with deeper issues carefully ignored, but it is more obviously effective than anything the Churches can offer in their present condition. In such a situation, a Church divided into several small sects is a tiresome embarrassment to the State in minor matters and in a very bad position to exercise much influence upon the life of the new institutions of modern society in major matters. The State has already made it very clear that, roughly speaking, it is only prepared to deal with the Churches, with the partial exception of the Roman Catholic Church, if they meet it as a united body on all the numerous matters, such as education, war damage, allocation of sites in new towns and the legal status of the clergy,

which are of common concern. The host of public and semi-public institutions which serve the whole community and which do so much to form the outlook of all of us, like schools, universities, factories and community centres, also usually make clear that they are prepared to admit representatives of the Churches only if these have a working understanding among themselves.

High-minded churchmen, strong in their conviction of the rightness of their distinctive denominational positions, may be roused to indignation by this situation. They will, no doubt, be disposed to make disparaging remarks about "National Christianity" and to enquire whether the Churches are to be expected to make light of the deep theological issues which underlie their divisions in order to save civil servants the labour of making out separate forms for Church of England, Baptists, Methodists and the rest.

Obviously, the representatives of the State must never be taken simply at their own valuation of themselves, especially in relation to church affairs. At the same time, this is not a problem which can be solved by the clergy's riding off hard on high theological hobby-horses, any more than it can be by the easy-going opportunism of "practical" ecclesiastics. A divided Church in a society which superficially is being progressively unified is in a situation of peculiar difficulty and complexity. It can only succeed in influencing that society if it achieves a measure of new unity within itself. Such unity cannot be manufactured if the conditions for it do not exist, but a clear realization of the price of disunity will help give responsibility to theological discussion.

### THE STUTTGART DECLARATION

We are told by a well-informed critic that the contents of some of the new journals that are beginning to appear in Germany are superior to what is being written in France and well ahead of anything that we have in this country.

A copy has reached us of *Die Wandlung*, a monthly review, published at Heidelberg, one of the co-operating Editors of which is Professor Karl Jaspers, whose Rectorial address we

published as a Supplement (C.N.-L. No. 247). It contains an article by Edwin Gross, a Lutheran pastor, on "The Guilt of the Church", in which a number of questions are addressed to the framers of the Stuttgart Declaration (published in C.N.-L. No. 254). This, as our readers may remember, was a statement made at a meeting with representatives of the World Council of Churches, by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, acknowledging that they were united with the German people in a solidarity of guilt. It gave rise to acute controversy, being attacked in Germany as a betrayal of the Fatherland and seized upon in quarters outside Germany as an acknowledgment by German church leaders of Germany's political guilt. Dr. Asmussen, the Chancellor of the Evangelical Church, replied to these criticisms in a remarkable article, the greater part of which we printed as a Supplement in the same issue of the Christian News-Letter. He insisted that both those who welcomed and those who condemned the declaration were alike involved in a common error. They interpreted the declaration in political terms. Since many of them had ceased to believe in a sphere of existence and meaning outside the political, they could not understand that the statement made at Stuttgart was not a political but a religious declaration. Those who made it were speaking *before God*.

It is at this point that the article in *Die Wandlung* takes up the discussion. The article deserves attention because it raises questions of much wider interest than the particular issue with which it deals. It also bears directly on the contents of the Supplement in this issue.

The writer recognizes that it was the intention of those who issued the declaration at Stuttgart to stand before God. But the question has to be asked whether they really did this? The fact that they turned their backs on the political sphere is in itself no guarantee that they succeeded in reaching the religious sphere. They may have got no further than the moral level. The Church is not always or necessarily what it professes to be, or wants to be; in spite of all its professions it remains what it is.



The fundamental defect of the Stuttgart Declaration, it is urged, is, first, that what was confessed was not the guilt of the *Church*, but the guilt of national-socialism and of the German people, and secondly, that the confession made by the Church was not really before God but only before its own consciousness and in the light of its own doctrinal standards, that is to say of its own idea. The standpoint of the declaration was thus not that of the publican but of the Pharisee. A confession by the Church of its own sin would be a confession of its own specific, historical contribution as *Church* to the growth of national-socialism.

In actual fact, the article maintains, the sin of the Church was of the same nature as the sin of national-socialism. The root evil of national-socialism was that it refused to acknowledge the radical, qualitative difference between God and man. It arrogated to itself the functions of God, and with a good conscience removed from its path all who refused to accept its faith or to conform to its type. A Church commits precisely the same sin when it, too, forgets the infinite distance between God and man, sets up its own infallible standards of orthodoxy and takes upon itself to decide between the wheat and the tares in anticipation of the last judgment.

National-socialism exhibited a demonic fury. The same demonism is manifested in a Church which will not brook any ecclesiastical or theological opposition. A Church which succumbs to the temptation of supposing that it has under its own hand the unbridgeable distance between God and man must remain blind to the crucial question whether its own demonic insistence on orthodoxy may not be the ultimate cause of the movement which began in the enlightenment and culminated in national-socialism, and whether political absolutism may not have had its roots in theological absolutism. If the Church were to confess this failure, it would no longer be standing in the place of the Pharisee but would have taken that of the publican. Real solidarity in guilt before God between the Church and national-socialism would then exist.

The attitude expressed in the words, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord", is incompatible with the claim to be in assured possession of the transcendent. It is the renunciation of any such claim. To stand before God is not something that can be achieved by an act of will. The state of the publican is not an attitude of idealism but a bitter reality. Pharisaism is the embodiment of a principle, but the attitude of the publican is the end of all principles, all new beginnings and all programmes. We have to reach that point before the true word of prophecy, which our time so greatly needs, can break forth.

It is impossible to discuss here whether Herr Gross does justice to all that is implied in the Stuttgart Declaration. But it is worth calling attention to his article both because it addresses searching questions to every Church and because it is important that Christians in other countries should realize at how deep a level the ultimate questions of religious faith are being faced at the present time in Germany.

#### THE SUPPLEMENT

The Conference of young people, which assembled at Oslo in Norway at the end of July, was made up of 1500 delegates from 60 different countries, appointed by the youth departments of the Churches associated with the World Council of Churches or by the various international Christian organizations working among young people. We print, as a Supplement, a striking speech made by Mr. M. M. Thomas, who is a member of the Syrian Church of St. Thomas in India. He has been working during the past year in connection with the World Student Christian Federation at Geneva. We are informed that one of the outstanding features of the Oslo Conference was the vigour, theological conviction, and intellectual power displayed by the representatives of the younger Churches.

Daniel Jenkins



## THE POLITICAL MESSAGE OF OSLO

BY M. M. THOMAS

Friends,

Has Oslo a political message? This question was posed clearly by a delegate the other day when he said: "Some young people of our nation are going to the World Youth Festival in Prague,<sup>1</sup> while some of us Christians have come to Oslo. Prague delegates will certainly return with a definite political message." And he asked: "Will Oslo give us a political message at least as clear and as definite as Prague, if not better?" Other delegates may not have put this question in the same way. Nevertheless, over and over again, it has come up in personal conversation and discussion groups. Has Oslo a political message?

I must confess at the very outset that I for one cannot see in Oslo a political message as strong, clear and definite as that which Prague would give. I came to Oslo perplexed and I return from Oslo more perplexed. Perplexed, but not in despair, for Jesus is Lord over this perplexity itself.

Oslo has brought to my consciousness a greater sense of the realities of the political world, and a greater sense of tragedy than I had before. I for one feel a growing perplexity. Many of us, like me, might have realized the tragic problems of colour and race, of colonies and power-politics, and of poverty, war and hate with a new acuteness which is depressing.

### THE PECULIAR CHRISTIAN PERPLEXITY

This knowledge of the ugly realities would have been more bearable if Oslo gave some simple analysis and some simple solution to them. On the other hand, what it did was to break down the answers we had before, thus adding to the perplexity. I remember two very definite experiences of mine at this Conference which I feel I must share with you.

<sup>1</sup> Organized by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, which has strong Communist representation.

On the opening day, we were in this hall with the news of the Dutch-Indonesian war disturbing us. I knew where my political decision lay and I came to that opening meeting full of righteousness for myself for my political decision and full of anger against the Dutch, and having clearly worked out in my own mind how to force the issue of the Dutch-Indonesian struggle on this Conference. But I remember how when Dr. Visser't Hooft confessed the guilt of his nation and extended his hand of Christian fellowship to the Indonesian delegation, the righteousness which I had built on my political decision broke to pieces. Some might have clapped their hands. Some might have thought of making capital out of that statement of Visser't Hooft. I couldn't think either of them, because the righteousness of my politics and the justification of my political decision, at that very moment, had broken down into a sense of common guilt, before God in Christ.

A similar experience came to me at the Rally, when John Deschner spoke.<sup>1</sup> Those American friends who have looked at Deschner's statement regarding America as a political statement, might have been angry with him. And ordinarily, with very strong conviction in politics, I would myself have taken it as a political statement and would have used it so. But, in fact, under God it had the exact opposite effect on me. It broke down completely the basis on which I was politically standing and politically justifying myself. A sense of common guilt before God in Christ shattered all my politics at that moment.

When these and similar experiences came to me, I almost wished I never came to this Conference. Was it not foolishness thus to expose myself to a situation of meeting people under God, when over and over again one's political righteousness broke down and revealed itself as irrelevant. Was it right for me thus to weaken my solidarity with those struggling for freedom and justice, my solidarity with those who hunger, the Indonesians who are in a life and death struggle, and with the oppressed people everywhere, on

<sup>1</sup> John Deschner was one of the American delegates.

which my political decisions were based? My communist friends, whose politics I share, would have called me sentimental, and my nationalist friends would have called me foolish. Over and over again, one felt like isolating oneself from these continuous disturbing meetings, to gather together the broken pieces of one's righteousness and politics, for after all, said I to myself, the political realities still remain, clearly demanding a political answer.

### THE CROSS AS A SOURCE OF POLITICAL WEAKNESS

This then is the real tragedy of Christian witness in politics, to which Oslo has called us. On the one hand, political justice necessitates a self-righteousness leading to definite political decisions. On the other, this self-righteousness breaks to pieces as we expose ourselves to the cross of Christ, wherein we are all seen in common guilt as crucifiers of Christ, needing forgiveness of God and one another. In politics, we are called upon to alternate between this shattering of self-righteousness and this gathering of the pieces of self-righteousness. Because of the perplexity and the tragedy we experience within ourselves, certainly a Christian is a creature not bold enough and not strong enough to be totally devoted to any political cause or any political party, however just.

Certainly my communist friends are right. The cross of Christ is foolishness, because it is the experience of a self-shattering which in politics makes for weakness and not for strength. But was not that moment when I got shattered within myself the very moment when Oslo became real to me as community? Was not Oslo born in that moment when we broke to pieces in a sense of common guilt before the Word of God?

### A PERSONAL CONFESSION

I must add a word of confession before I finish. Because India was on the threshold of independence, I thought I was strong and felt that I could face the Britishers as political equals and imagined that it would make for better fellowship. But yesterday, at the Indian delegation meeting when we as a delegation had to confess that we failed to meet the British



delegation as belonging to Christ, to grapple with the problem of British-Indian relation, I was overwhelmed by a burden of my own guilt in the matter; and I take this opportunity to confess my guilt in public. And, after all, our political strength, for which we in India have laboured for over a century, had not made for community in Oslo. Many delegations here who were humble enough to face the foolishness and the weakness of the shattering of their pride under the cross did achieve a community which will be their strength in the days to come as they, in their separate nations, face their political responsibilities. "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted those of low degree." If we share his cross, we shall share his resurrection. The knowledge of common guilt and divine forgiveness as the basis of common life—this is the political message of Oslo, for all I know.

Perplexed we came, more perplexed we return. But we do not despair, for Jesus is Lord.

This faith releases us for a corporate witness to the sacramental significance of all politics to common life. It will certainly require the continued participation of most of us in the dirty necessities of the rough and tumble of party politics and the call may come to some of us to undertake this task as a group witness. To others, the call may come to witness to the same faith by living a life of conscious protest against all politics, in small communities of reconciliation. But to all the Lordship of Christ must mean a point at which they say "no" to the necessity of the political world, crying: "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God!"

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